

Prologue

Range? Jaron thought, as he lay in the prone position.

Five miles, three hundred twenty-three feet, the voice in his head answered. *You know, if this kill is successful, you'll break the world record.*

Now that the target was visible, the scope's internal LED displays blossomed to life with its recommended settings.

Maybe I should give Guinness a call...have them come down here with a scope to record the shot.

Very funny. Control your breathing. I suggest two clicks to the right as well.

Without looking away, Jaron made the adjustments. Modern-day scopes calculated variables such as distance and wind, which would then feed into an onboard unit within the rifle. The shooter simply would have to ensure the target was within the crosshairs and pull the trigger. Jaron never depended on the automatic features, similar to how professional photographers always used manual settings, proving that the human variable was still a requirement. This was all considering the shooter was even using a scope instead of having had their eye replaced altogether with a magnifying implant.

Do you have a soul? Jaron thought after a few moments.

I don't understand the question, replied the voice.

Never mind, he thought. *Tell me about our wedding.*

We decided last minute right here in Eden. He heard her voice as she recalled the memory, and a small smile parted his lips as she continued. *We snagged Markus on the*

way to the shuttle. Then we were off to the chapel and married the next day! Jaron and Mari never regretted, and in fact cherished their last-minute wedding.

Yeah, that's it, he thought.

It was time. He exhaled, closed his mouth, and stopped breathing. The timing had to be perfect. Breathing could make his hands move slightly. But if the shot was not taken soon, the lack of oxygen would cause his hands shake. The wind, target, and distance—combined with instincts and years of training—all aligned at the speed of thought while the world slowed around him. The sounds and smells of the city faded as his hands moved ever so slightly to track his target.

Why do you do this, darling? came the thought in his head

Because you died, and I don't know how to do anything else.

He pulled the trigger and watched through his scope as the target's head turned into a pink mist.

Five years before, Jaron had sat aboard the navy carrier *USS Del Mission* as it began its orbit around the moon. Colonel De la Cruz had stood at the head of the briefing room in front of a large viewing screen. “All right, ladies and gentlemen, the Sons of Tantalus have situated themselves on a major moon colony,” he began.

The outpost recently had been inhabited by the fanatical religious group, whose practices had been banished on earth due to the group's illegal brain modifications—but mostly because of their habit of eating nonbelievers.

The colonel continued, “The earth police unit previously sent was killed to the man.”

As he spoke, the screen displayed the horrific aftermath via satellite photos: police officers mutilated beyond recognition, meticulously laid out in neat rows for all to see.

“The Sons of Tantalus are extremely well funded and hired a mercenary team that ambushed the police force. Unfortunately for them, this is now a military matter. The police simply weren’t prepared for what they faced. Now these mercenaries have to answer to the Marine Corps, except we’re through asking questions.”

Jaron, then a captain, sat in the uncomfortable mockery of a leather chair. When the colonel paused, the quiet whoosh of the circulation system could be heard pumping stale air throughout the briefing room, interrupted every now and again by the rattling of some unseen panel. It was always an unsettling thought that a not so thick titanium hull was all that stood between the personnel on one side and the instant death of space on the other. Like all military vessels, the carrier was built for efficiency in order to keep its occupants alive, rather than alive *and* comfortable. Although the *Del Mission* was one of the navy’s largest carriers, Jaron felt as though the necessity of having to transport and sustain people had been thrown in as an afterthought. Despite the vessel being half as large as a metropolis, to say it was cramped would be an understatement. But “cramped” also defined most aspects of life on the carrier: cramped mess deck, cramped passageways, cramped pretty much every place a person would be. After briefly wondering just what all the space in the naval vessel actually was dedicated to, his thoughts wandered to Mari as the colonel finished the short briefs he was known for.

“Captain Shen will be leading the main force,” Colonel De la Cruz said. “This will be a by-the-numbers Marine Corps operation. We go in, ruin everybody’s shit, and let the army clean up.”

Less than an hour later, Jaron sat in the dropship with the rest of his squad, reviewing a feed on his tablet of the infantry units already on the ground engaging the enemy. To an untrained eye, the screen would appear to be ablaze with seemingly random blips and shapes buzzing about chaotically. But Jaron saw troop movements and focused attacks around an entrenched enemy. Even though the SOT and their hired guns had expected the attack and were fighting from a fortified position, the marines were doing well. Jaron offered a small nod of approval before flicking off the screen and handing the tablet to a corporal who stood just outside of the dropship’s open hatch. Jaron leaned his head back as he thought about his task of dropping unnoticed behind enemy lines and eliminating key members of the mercenary leadership.

This particular dropship, reserved for special forces, was large enough to fit only five marines. Deceptively appearing to be little more than a freight container, it was composed of an alloy that made it quiet on radar, cool on reentry, and tough where it counted. Thrust was extremely limited to avoid producing heat signatures; the ship mostly relied on gravity to reach its insertion point. She wasn’t designed for fancy flying; she was designed to fall out of the sky and hit the ground as fast as possible. There was no pilot; coordinates were entered—synced with the carrier’s location, speed, and distance—and from there it was more like a guided drop than flying. It fell extremely fast and at the last moment used any available fuel for a mass deceleration to hit the ground as quickly as possible without killing its occupants. Vomiting was an unfortunate but

common occurrence on a dropship. With the rapidly changing stages of zero gravity, the fall from orbit, and the deceleration at the end, there was no best place as to where it would fall or rise or go sideways. Veterans knew it was best to keep their mouths shut on a drop to avoid the risk of eating another marine's recycled chow. When the ship did land, its occupants usually prayed that a large box crashing into the ground would confuse the enemy for the split second it took for the hatch to burst open.

Jaron's team landed without any losses. The dropship's rear hatch shot open, followed by a crash as the doors slammed against the hull. As with a dozen combat missions—and hundreds of training missions—two point men jumped out to each side and fired, allowing the remaining team to exit. The mercenaries were well trained but thankfully still caught by surprise.

The battle was brief but intense and considered an overall success. It wasn't long before the mercenaries surrendered, and any living members of the SOT were captured and prepared for transport back to Earth. Jaron was still disheartened when he read the casualty report on his way back to the *Del Mission*. Many of the mercenaries employed by the Sons of Tantalus were former special forces themselves, and as good as the marines were, some wouldn't be leaving the moon alive. Even the most seasoned warriors could fall prey to being in the wrong place at the wrong time or just plain bad luck.

The *Del Mission* was still in orbit when Jaron received the news. *Strange*, he later thought, *our families are supposed to get that knock on the door and receive that "We regret to inform you" speech. Not the other way around.* He had returned to his quarters that evening when he had received the summons from Colonel De la Cruz. Jaron thought

nothing of it, figuring it to be an informal debriefing of the mission, accompanied by their customary glass of rum. But when the door silently slid open, and he saw the look on his commander's face, he knew something was wrong. Jaron never would forget when the colonel somberly informed him that Mari had been killed in an accident back on Earth.

Jaron was the very best at what he did. After basic training at Camp Pendleton, he went straight on to completing special forces training, ending with the solar-system survival course, which in itself had a 90 percent failure rate. After he had reached sergeant in almost record time, his company commander recommended him for Officer Candidates School, where he graduated at the top of his class. He was soon promoted to captain and had his own command. Mari had changed everything about Jaron's world. Before her there was only the next mission, surviving one battlefield to move on to another. Mari opened his eyes, allowing him to see past the horizon of a warzone. Concepts new to him such as hope and companionship were overwhelming yet wonderful.

He had met Mari while he was on leave, walking through the financial district of Eden. He always felt a mixture of equal parts relief and annoyance when off post. The relief came with the respite from his micromanaged military life, while the annoyance stemmed from the lack of military structure. It grated his nerves to the core as he stood in line watching civilians shuffle from one foot to the other, huffing and puffing about the whole three minutes they had to stand in line to get their lattes. When he reached the front, he ordered absently, only looking up when he handed his credit chip to the barista on the other side of the counter. For the rest of his days, he would remember the first time their eyes met in that coffee shop. He had heard dozens—if not hundreds—of marines

talking about going home to that special someone. Battle-hardened troops sounding like schoolgirls talking about storybook love in the barracks. Jaron would just smile, knowing inwardly that the young love-struck marine was only grasping for a sense of normalcy in a world of chaos. When he saw Mari, though, he knew it was love. Strangely, it was fear at first. Fear at not knowing what he felt inside, and the physical jolt that started deep in his chest and seemed to run through the bottoms of his feet. In its wake was a feeling of tranquility to the likes he had not known until that day. Only when she looked away, scooping her hair behind an ear, did he realize he was staring so intently. They had dinner that night and spent each moment together that they could every day after.

At the age of twenty-eight, Jaron was discharged and came home to Mari's grave and, shortly after, an addiction to any drug that would help him forget. He soon found that the job market for a former special forces marine was less than poor. It was not long before Kamiken found him, recognizing him for his talents. He was hired with a recommendation from the company psychiatrist that he be fitted with a sympathy implant. After all, corporations had to ensure their killers were mentally sound—mentally sound enough to work anyway.